BACK TO NATURE: 
THE AGRARIAN FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIETY ACCORDING 
TO IBN KHALDŪN

BY

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WHILE the North African 'Abd al-Rahmān Ibn Khaldūn (732-808/1332-1406) was writing the first draft of his universal interpretation of history, the Muqaddima, on the other side of the Mediterranean Italian engineers experimented with gunpowder weapons, the first mentioning of which goes back to the early decades of the fourteenth century1. As is well-known, these weapons became the backbone of infantries which were generally recruited in villages and urban centers and which in time became more than a match for the hitherto dominant cavalries of often nomadic stock 2. In fact, Ibn Khaldūn's contemporary Tīmūr (736-807/1336-1405) was the last nomadic empire builder in history 3. Although nomads eventually adopted firearms and countinued to control local agricultural centers, they were never again able to extend their power over urban populations in Asia, Europe or North Africa 4. Thus two of the central theses of the Muqaddima, those of the militarily superior and morally unified nomads as empire builders and the


2 Halil İNAŁCIK, «The Socio-Political Effects of the Diffusion of Firearms in the Middle East», in PARRY (cited in n. 1), pp. 195-217; Andrew C. HESS, «Firearms and the Decline of Ibn Khaldun's Military Elite», Archivium Ottomanicum IV (1972), pp. 173-201. Hess has been the first to draw attention to the decline of cavalries after IBN KHALDON.


4 Peter von SIVERS, «Alms and Arms: The Combative Saintliness of the Awldād Śiddī Shaykh in the Algerian Sahara, 16th-19th Centuries», article in the process of publication.

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militarily inferior and morally depraved urban dwellers as subjects of the nomads, were flawed right from the start and never became the universal instruments of historical interpretation which Ibn Khaldūn had announced them as being. As it stands, the Muqaddima is a superb introduction to history during a phase when it was made by men on horse- and camelback but a very insufficient one for the understanding of the Ottoman, Šafavid-Qajar-Iranian, Moghul or Sa’di-‘Alawi-Moroccan empires.

The question of arms technology and its social effects is part of a wider problem, that of technology in society in general. Ibn Khaldūn wrote during a time when the dominant technology in Eurasia/Northern Africa was that of agriculture accomplished with plow and oxen. As such this technology was an adaptation to the demands of a population density higher than that of hunting and gathering or slash and burn societies and their respective technologies. Irrigation or other intensified farming techniques as well as urban settlement were adjustments to further rising population densities. In this latter case the agricultural producers were stimulated into relatively intensive production by opportunities existing in the urban market. Inversely, urban supervision of irrigation works and manufacture of farm tools gave the city the function of a necessary partner in a system of labor division and interdependency. The size of the rural-urban aggregates depended on the available transportation and storage facilities. Under conditions of animal transport sizes tended to be limited to single city states; sea, river and canal transportation facilitated realms with a capital and secondary centers. In both cases a close connection existed between demography, production technology, settlement patterns, transportation technology and overall size.

But Ibn Khaldūn was not primarily concerned with city states and rural-urban realms. His analysis focuses on the empires and conquering kingdoms which dominated Islamic history. In these territorially much larger political units the relationship between demography and size was


much more tenuous. Here we are not talking about demography as the cause of the stringing together of unrelated rural-urban centers through conquest. It made little sense to relieve a demographic squeeze by annexing far-away provinces, the wheat of which could not be transported economically over long distances and therefore was useless for the feeding of empty stomachs. Rather we are talking about tributes or taxes from conquered rural-urban centers which were more worthwhile to transport. They benefited an imperial ruling class headquartered in a rural-urban center of its own where the general population continued its habitual local or regional exchange of manufactured goods for food staples. Empires and conquering kingdoms were political units superimposed on considerably smaller productive-transportational ones.

In these empires and conquering kingdoms military technology was obviously far ahead of the contemporary production and transportation technologies and one of the characteristics of Islamic history was that the gap between the three was never fully closed. On the contrary, the gap was never wider than during the Islamic centuries just before Ibn Khaldūn: the introduction of the stirrup from China to the Middle East either shortly before or during the early Muslim conquests gave swift cavalries a decisive fighting edge over the much slower infantries dominant during the preceding Roman-imperial centuries 7. Of course, infantries both in their Roman and post-fourteenth century musket-equipped manifestations were equally ahead of the then available productive and transportational technologies, but the gap was not quite so pronounced and favored at least some consolidation alongside expansion. In the following two sections on (1) rural-urban organization and (2) the ethics of competition and communality I shall critically investigate social and moral problems arising from the gap between technologies, as Ibn Khaldūn perceives them more or less clearly.

1. RURAL-URBAN ORGANIZATION

Ibn Khaldūn gives little evidence of being aware of the nexus between population density and production/transportation technologies. But he shows a superb awareness of crucial social problems by taking labor and

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production as his point of departure. His historical analysis begins with the distinction between two basic types of population, countryfolk and urbanites (ajyāl al-badw wa-l-hadar), distinguished from each other according to their different modes of production (istikhzāj). On the countryside (badw) the characteristic mode is that of agriculture (al-falḥ min al-ghirāṣat wa-l-zirā'a) and animal breeding (al-qiyām 'alā l-ḥayawān ... li-nitājihā), including that of sheep, cattle, goats, bees, silkworms and camels. In urban terrain (haar) the typical mode is that of crafts (ṣanā'i), such as those of the carpenters, tailors and blacksmiths. It is to be noted here that the criterion of production provides for a dividing line between country and city, not nomadism and settlement which would be without meaning for production. Peasants and nomads line up behind one form of productive technology, since they are both food producers. Urbanites are ranked behind another form, even though their sedentary characteristics are in no way different from those of peasants, because they are manufacturers of household goods and implements. Thus food production and urban provision of the technological means for this production constitute the central and very felicitous concept in Ibn Khaldūn's historical analysis.

As well-chosen as this concept is, it is not without its problems. No reasons are given in the Muqaddima why production should be organized in the specific rural-urban form which Ibn Khaldūn takes as his point of analytical departure. He takes it for granted that rural production functions in this fashion in Islamic societies, or even universally and he emphasizes repeatedly that it constitutes a natural (tablī) form in accordance with the rules of civilization (ʿumrān). However, in accordance with the ideas expressed in the introduction of this paper, there is no production method in history which can be said to be more an expression of nature than any other. Each method depends largely on the

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9 Ibn Khaldūn, Muqaddimat, ed. Quatrémere (hereafter cited as Q), I 220.
Q misspels istikhzāj.
10 Q I 221-3, 276.
12 Discussed for the first time Q I 68-9.
population density for which it has been adopted and without which it does not make sense. If only a few mouths have to be fed, a slash and burn farmer has no reason to toil with a plow for cereals. Less and easier work is entirely sufficient and the diet is as variegated as in cereal agriculture, if not more so. Of course, there are a number of factors which excuse Ibn Khaldūn’s ignorance of alternative rural production methods. Plow agriculture for cereals had been present in the Middle East from c. 3500 BC onwards and the memory of preceding forms of rural production was justifiably dim. Knowledge of subsaharan African agricultural methods was not much more detailed, as far as I am aware, and cereal agriculture with plows was so widespread in Eurasia/Northern Africa that it could be mistaken easily for the most natural form of extracting a living from the ground. Ibn Khaldūn is wrong, but not willfully so as far as comparative agriculture is concerned.

Failure of grounding productive analysis in demography leads Ibn Khaldūn to a crucial misconception. In his opinion «the harshness of rural life precedes the easy life of urbanism» (khushūnat al-badda wa qabla rifḥ al-hadāra). A strong contrast is built up between the basic life of the rurals concerned with such necessities as food, shelter and warmth on the one hand and the comfortable life of the city dwellers enjoying leisure, fine food and clothes, refined housing amenities and household furnishings on the other. Throughout the Muqaddima rough and simple ruralism versus soft and luxurious urbanism functions as a main analytical assumption. Of course, there is no denying that urban life in the past was soft and luxurious for the privileged and we twentieth century Western observers even have the added pleasure of witnessing the broad phenomenon of suburbia, with entire middle classes supposedly partaking of urban ease. But I am not sure whether the average occasional worker, refuse collector, water carrier, porter or member of the less prestigious crafts would have agreed with Ibn Khaldūn’s characterization of city life. It is doubtful whether for a majority of urban dwellers existence was any more luxurious than rural life for countryfolk.

Historiogenetically the city represents an advanced stage of cereal agriculture technology. The initial stage of this technology in neolithic

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13 Q II 217.
14 Q I 149-50, II 250-5.
15 Q I 224.
times was that of low density villages and dry-farming with plow and draft animals. In these farming communities the production of cereals had to be balanced carefully with the breeding of draft and meat animals on the available land surfaces. Too much land under the plow endangered the feeding of the draft animals and also the meat supply. Furthermore, even though cereals were high-yielding crops, nutritionally they did not equal meat. Thus enough land had to be left over for pasturage.

Higher population densities in the Middle East were accommodated through the introduction of irrigation and more intensive labor. Even higher population densities were absorbed through two further modifications. First, surplus populations which were unemployable in irrigated or dry-farming agriculture were squeezed into special high density places, that is, cities occupying a minimum of agriculturally valuable land. City dwellers had still to be fed by the cereal farmers, but they could redeem themselves, so to speak, by developing the technologies of crafts and engineering. Second, since high quantities of cereals for the feeding of agricultural producers and non-producers alike were required, pasture land was cut down to the minimum necessary for the draft animals. A major share of the meat production was transferred to agriculturally unsuitable outlying lands where this production was entrusted to nomads. Thus cities and nomads were twin phenomena indicative of advanced cereal agriculture with relatively high population densities.

Both represented the subsidiary technologies of tool manufacture or engineering and meat production in specially designed non-agricultural areas while labor-intensive, irrigated cereal agriculture occupied the

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dominant place. Nomadism within this complex did not merely presuppose agriculture, but highly advanced, irrigated agriculture.

From 1100 BC onwards nomads and cities improved their subsidiary positions somewhat by gaining an edge in the technology of transportation, as a result of the domestication of the camel and the introduction of saddles capable of holding heavy loads without unduly interfering with the hump. Nomads specializing in nothing but the breeding of camels appeared on the scene. Although cereal farmers using irrigation remained the providers of staples for the cities and, to a lesser degree, the nomads and therefore were needed more than they needed the cities and nomads, a greater flexibility of relations was now established. A more widespread linking of irrigated areas, cities and nomadic region’s in the form of ural-urban realms became possible. By the time of the first Islamic conquests in 12 AH/634 AD the articulation of production into irrigated cereal agriculture, urban hardware manufacture and nomadic meat production was largely complete and improved animal transportation allowed a relatively wide range of exchange.

This articulation of production into a dominant and two subsidiary modes would not have occurred had it not been for demographic reasons, since loss of subsistence autonomy was a high price to pay for often spotty integration. Not surprisingly, therefore, downswings in the population curve meant returns to more autonomous organizations of production. Cereal farmers at greater distances from cities abandoned irrigation and reverted back to larger animal holdings, weaker segments of nomadic populations settled in oases or agricultural fringes and cities adopted farming within their walls. The typical tendency in response to a thinning of the population was subsistence agriculture. Ibn Khaldūn was a keen observer of this re-transformation of camel nomads and city dwellers into general dry-farmers with mixed cereal agriculture and animal holdings. As a contemporary of the Black Death (748/1348) and its recurrent decennial cycles he possessed first hand experience of demographic depressions and thus the phenomenon of subsistence agriculture was for him far more readily observable than that of

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productive articulation into irrigated agriculture, urban crafts and nomadic animal breeding\textsuperscript{20}.

In view of these demographic conditions for the articulation or contraction of productive technologies the allegedly millennial devastation of North African agriculture by the locust-like «Hilalians» takes on a quite different coloration. First of all, we now know that the Arab Banū Hilāl and Banū Sulaym tribal federations never invaded North Africa in one blow in 443/1052, as Ibn Khaldūn seems to assert, but trickled in both before and after this year of first military victories over the Zīrī dynasty in Ifrīqiyya\textsuperscript{21}. Thus destruction was largely limited to one region and for the rest the Arab tribes were integrated fairly peacefully. Second, insofar as these Arabs trickled in, they contributed to demographic boost of the North African population and therefore their arrival resulted in intensified, not diminished agriculture. Notably in the northern Sahara their mingling with the indigenous population resulted in the foundation or enlargement of a number of oases with irrigated wheat and date palm agriculture over a period of several centuries\textsuperscript{22}. While Zīrī irrigation systems suffered under the arriving nomads, in other parts of the Maghrib rural production was stimulated.

In the second half of the eighth fourteenth century, during the lifetime of Ibn Khaldūn, the situation was quite different and although the integration of the Arabs was still an ongoing process the overall population density declined. The ravages of the Black Death and its after-cycles made irrigated agriculture a less pressing concern. But in its place it was not nomadism but subsistence agriculture which appeared on the scene. Of course, if one engages in sloppy thinking farmers with large flocks or herds in addition to their dry-farming enterprises can be easily transformed into nomads, especially if they also happened to

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Q II 201-3, 212-13, 229-31.
\textsuperscript{22} Peter VON SIVERS, \textit{Alms and Arms} (cited in n. 4); Jacques BERQUE, «\textit{Les Hilaliens repentis ou l'Algérie rurale au XV\textsuperscript{e} siècle d'après un manuscrit jurisprudentiel}», \textit{Annales ESC} XXV (1970), pp. 1325-53; BERQUE, \textit{L'intérieur du Maghreb, XV\textsuperscript{e}-XIX\textsuperscript{e} siècle} (Paris, Gallimard, 1978), pp. 7-65.
periodically move their settlements in accordance with shifting fallows. But it has to be reiterated: it is not settlement but productive technology which distinguishes the agriculturalist from the nomad. If the North African population did indeed decline during the late classical period and in early modern times, possibly as the result of further pandemics, then it could only have strengthened subsistence farming, not nomadism. The aforementioned military incapability of the nomads to conquer new kingdoms for themselves might very well have been also a demographic weakness. By contrast, dry-farming had become so productive by the beginning of the nineteenth century that it began to transcend the boundaries of subsistence. Napoleon made good use of Algerian wheat deliveries during the Continental Blockade. Thus North African history after the Black Death and in early modern times demonstrates that it not only had nothing to do anymore with Arab immigrations but furthermore was agriculturally quite significant, even if essentially subsistence-oriented.

Unfortunately the confusion of subsistence dry-farming—cum—large animal holdings with nomadism to no small degree started with Ibn Khaldûn. For all its greatness in presenting a comprehensive view of productive forces in Islamic society the Muqaddima also is often confusing. Nowhere does the author distinguish clearly between low and high density agriculture. A careful scrutiny of the half dozen passages on rural production demonstrates this confusion. Early on Ibn Khaldûn gives a description of three main types of rural folk, that is, grain farmers living in small settlements (madāthir), villages (qurā) and mountain redoubts (lit. jibāl); sheep breeders (shāwiyya) who however also rear cattle; and camel bedouins (called jīl al-ārab). The description appears to be that of subsistence farming which was typical for Kabylia mountain Berbers and northern Algerian Arabic-speaking people who kept large flocks of sheep, some cattle and grew ten or twenty hectar of wheat for auto-consumption. Ibn Khaldûn further underlines this subsistence concept involving low density populations by mentioning a

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24 Q I 222.

fourth compact type of rural producer, that of breeders of sheep and camels who also kept cattle and therefore must have been cereal farmers on the side. The *Muqaddima* seems to take low density agriculture as its analytical point of departure.

But later Ibn Khaldūn apparently switches to a discussion of high density rural production. For instance, in one passage he seems to be of the opinion that rurals are submissive (kāna khudā'ahum wa-tā'atahum) to urbanites and have to exchange their grain and animal products for urban produced tools. In another the advantages of specialization are extolled (although elsewhere subsistence autonomy is held in high regard, as we shall see below): farming involves cooperation (ta'āwun) between six to ten persons, among whom the smith and carpenter are in charge of the tools and the farmer of the oxen, the plowing and the harvesting of the wheat. The quantity of wheat produced is many times that of what the six to ten persons consume. Finally, in three sections devoted to descriptions of the agricultural crafts and sciences the preeminence of irrigated agriculture as the central productive technology is stressed, as well as the weakness (adj. mustad'af) and lowliness (dhilla) of its practitioners. In this discussion of advanced agriculture presumably high population levels leading to the loss of autonomy (in the parlance of the *Muqaddima* «submissiveness» and «lowliness» of the irrigation farmers) are presupposed. With one exception not a word is spent on animal breeding and even this exception treats of the keeping of animals for milk, silk and honey — products which one would attribute more to advanced than to subsistence agriculture. Rather confusingly the nomads as subsidiary meat and transport animal producers drop out of the picture of high density agriculture while they are given a high profile in low density subsistence farming.

Thus, even though the *Muqaddima* begins with a superb productive analysis, it quickly presents us with three major difficulties. First, cereal agriculture based on plow-farming is equated with nature and civilization as such, even though it is merely one of many technologies, historically tied to a specific population density. Second, cities are assumed to be natural havens of ease and luxury, although historiogenetically they are last resorts for the unemployable rural popu-

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26 Q I 223-24.
27 Q I 276-7; cf. II 212-13.
28 Q II 235; cf. I 68-70, II 289-90.
29 Q II 276-7, 296, 317; III 120.
30 Q II 276.
lation surplus in search of productive labor. Third, agriculturalists and nomads, are described as destructive first and cooperative second, as far as their urban interests are concerned, even though historiogenetically their behavior is the reverse. All three difficulties point to a curious reversal of the historical process in the *Muqaddima* which shall be analyzed in detail in the following section.

2. THE ETHICS OF COMPETITION AND COMMUNALITY

Whatever the local circumstances causing nomads to attack the nearby city with which they had previously cooperated more or less peacefully for productive goals (circumstances involving rural demographic rise or urban decline or both), military technology enabled these nomads to extend their attacks to other cities for the purpose of conquest, tributes and taxation. Sustained conquests brought fiscal but not productive rewards, since with prevailing transportation technologies productive integration over large distances was impossible. Furthermore, while on the local scene of the original attack demography may have played a role, it did not in the case of sustained conquests. Such conquests required the dispersal of the conquerors to such an extent that they could not possibly contribute to rising population levels outside the original center of expansion. Therefore usually the immediate policy of nascent empires was directed at overcoming the military arbitrariness of the conquests by demographic growth and productive coalescence, through such means as the foundation of cities, investments in agriculture and low taxes.

But as Ibn Khaldūn shows with his unique model of cyclical dynastic history (on which more below), during classical Islamic times not a single empire ever succeeded in filling the imperial-military-fiscal shell with a population and productiveness adequate to its size. All that imperial governments actually did, if they maintained themselves long enough in


power, was that they unwittingly strengthened the many regional rural-urban centers of which they had gained possession and so prepared these centers to relinquish their unproductive fiscal obligations towards the governments. But it is doubtful whether such regions as lower, middle and upper Iraq, northern and southern Syria and Egypt — to name only the most important rural-urban centers of the central Islamic lands — ever experienced population strains which they were unable to accommodate. Thus classical Islamic historical reality was that of rural-urban regions which provided more or less abundantly for their inhabitants without being forced by their demographies to search for more advanced modes of production and which for more or less extended periods were fiscally incorporated into larger political units.

From the vantage point of politics and administration the history of Islamic countries during the classical period is a continuing series of failures with the concomitant hope that somehow it must be possible to build a truly enduring empire if only one more attempt is made. Anyone who has worked with the universal historians of classical times will be able to identify this mixture of short-term resignation and long-range enthusiasm which underlies the history of Islamic lands. The Muqaddima likewise is deeply imbued with this mixture of resignation and enthusiasm which results from the gap between military and productive possibilities. Only from the fourteenth century onwards when firearms enabled cities to defend their interests against nomads even during times of weak demography did the gap narrow somewhat, at least as far as making the dynasties located in these cities more long-lived. But since this narrowing of the gap was not accompanied by decisive demographic growth and attendant advancement of productive technologies, these post-Ibn Khaldūnian empires made little progress in the internal integration of provinces tenously held together by cumbersome fiscal administrations. Only twentieth century industrialization and, hopefully, eventual agricultural development will stand any chances of eliminating the gap.

If it is true that in Middle Eastern and North African empires and conquering kingdoms demography never caught up with size, then Ibn Khaldūn’s famous theory of three to six generation cycles of imperial rule takes on a character quite different from the metaphor of the natural life span which the author alleges. In non-Ibn Khaldūnian terms: the generations of conquerors create an artificial administrative-fiscal realm

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33 Q II 230.
which they seek to populate so as to lessen its artificiality. Population expansion continues during the following generations of consolidating rulers, but it does not rise to a level where empire-wide productive integration and exchange become a demographic necessity. Provinces gradually cease to forward tax surpluses to the capital, since they receive few productive returns for their fiscal contributions. During the concluding generation the dynasty is thrown back on to the rural resources of the region around the capital which usually are insufficient to allow it to survive against new, outside imperial dynasties on the rise. Thus the problem of instability lies in the original imperial impulse, and not in crucial and correctable dynastic failures in the later developmental cycle of the empire. Once the cycle of empire-building has started, almost no corrective short of a miraculous super-fertility of the population or sudden disappearance of epidemics will prevent imperial dissolution. In a sense Ibn Khaldūn is right with his assertion of natural, that is, inevitable dynastic cycles — provided demography remained low and technology did not change. But once these conditions change the nature metaphor reveals itself as quite meaningless.

Since for Ibn Khaldūn it is not the disparity between imperial impulse and insufficient population density which causes the instability of imperial politics, he has to assume that this instability creeps in at some later time during the dynastic cycle. According to the Muqaddima, instability begins in the second generation when the ruler cuts himself loose from the companions with whom his father was associated during the conquests and replaces them with creatures of his own choosing. In the terminology of the Muqqadima, second generation kings by nature appropriate prestige for themselves (lit. tābī‘iyat al-mulk al-infirād bi-l-majd), restrict access to the throne and cause the excluded companions of the first generation to rise in revolt. If crushed, these former companions lose their blood binding (‘āṣabiyya) which once had given the dynasty its imperial impulse for far-flung conquests and new followers are substituted. However, the ‘āṣabiyya of these new followers is weaker since it is of more artificial origin. Thus transition from one ethical model of conducting political affairs to another according to Ibn Khaldūn is the cause for imperial and royal instability and he leaves no doubt about which model he thinks is superior.

‘Āṣabiyya or blood binding is, of course, the brilliant ethical concept

34 Account based on Q I 247-50, 305-9, 313-17; II 124-6, 239, 244-47, 251, 263, 267.
35 Q I 299, 302-3, 315, 330-1; II 100-3.
on which much of the fame of the *Muqaddima* rests. It is defined as compassion and affection for one's next of kin (*al-shafaqa wa-l-na'ara 'alā dhawi arhamihim wa qurbāhun*) which create mutual support (*ta'āḍud*) and assistance (*tanāsur*) among kinsfolk. It expresses itself in the prestige (*wāqar, tajalla*) of tribal elders (*mashāyikh, kubārā*) and in the power (*sultān*) of kings who, thanks to the backing of their superior (*ghalib*) *'asabiyyāt*, restrain inferior groups from fighting each other. *'Asabiyya* expresses itself also in mutual aggression (*mughālabā*) and defense (*mudāja'a*) between tribes (*qabā'il*) and dynasties (*duwal*). Individual as well as collective hostility of everyone against everyone (*'udwān ba'dihim 'an ba'din*) is part of man's nature and has to be restrained either by persuasion or compulsion or both. Thus *'asabiyya* promotes both communalism and competition.

At first glance logic seems a bit twisted in these ethics of *'asabiyya*. How can one and the same principle encourage communalism and competition? Obviously Ibn Khaldun's discussion is not very systematic. Otherwise he would have noticed that the war of everyone against everyone does not logically require restraint. As Hobbes also did not realize, this war can go on until the strongest becomes the final victor in solitary splendor. General extermination is not a deterrent to the strongest who has everything to gain. If the war ceases then it does so because the premise of everybody against everybody else is wrong. Everyone is not everyone else's enemy because everyone has friends. (Ibn Khaldun is clearly aware of the falseness of the general war premise but lets this premise stand anyway). Thus it can be determined in an absolute sense that ethics built on either total competition or total communalism are wrong. But where the dividing line is to be drawn is relative and depends again on the technology of production which we have encountered in section one of this paper and which defines basic relations in society.

The ethics of *'asabiyya* are obviously the ethics of subsistence rural production. In this form of agriculture by far the most important consideration is that of keeping the population level high enough so as to justify the plow and animal breeding technology employed. By contrast, in irrigated agriculture population is no longer of the same critical

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36 Q I 234-5.
37 Q I 233, 299.
38 Q I 235, 278.
39 Q I 71, 338; II 289-90.
importance and leadership of the rural-urban community as well as commercial property gained from exchange become more attractive. The more important a specific good in society is to its participant individual members, the more it is opened to competition and the fewer communal strings are attached to it. Therefore in subsistence agriculture the prestige of possessing the largest number of descendants is the focus of a fierce and largely open competition, while leadership functions and property holdings, which are of lesser importance, are largely left to communal control. For example, military heads are appointed and tribal militias recruited by the community only when the need arises. Similarly, plots of the tribal patrimony are acquired on the basis of communal distribution or redistribution, but are not important enough to warrant forceful occupation or purchase. In short, 'asabiyya is the ethics of competition for status, only minimally controlled by the community through segmentary checks, while power and wealth remain largely uncompeted for and essentially at the disposition of the community as a whole.

Furthermore, 'asabiyya is the ethics of status competition among males only. The Muqaddima abounds with descriptions which eulogize such «virile» qualities as military training, physical endurance, bravery, toughness and manliness (rujūla or rujūliyya). By contrast, if women are mentioned at all they appear as weak, cowardly and dependent on the master of the household. These descriptions typically correspond to the productive requirements of cereal agriculture, primarily in its subsistence branch but to a considerable degree also under circumstances of irrigation. In order to be self-perpetuating, cereal agriculture required high birth-rates which were guaranteed better by

40 Cf. Q I 233-4.
41 Ibn Khaldūn is silent on this topic. See, for instance, Joshua Prawer, «Étude de quelques problèmes agraires et sociaux d'une seigneurie croisée au XIIIe siècle», Byzantion XXII-XXIII (1952-53), pp. 143-70; Jacques Weulersse, Paysans de Syrie et du Proche Orient, 8th ed. (Paris, Gallimard, 1946), pp. 96-109. In Syria redistribution was formalized under the name of mushâ'.
43 Q I 229, 236, 251; I 114, 278-9.
44 Q I 229, 307.
women confined to light work in the household than to sharing the field work with men. Furthermore, in comparison to simpler forms of agriculture accomplished without plow, cereal farming with the plow demanded physically extenuating labor of long hours with large animals and heavy tools, thereby bringing forth an almost exclusively male work world. Male dominance is without doubt a companion result of the technology of cereal farming and its overwhelming presence in the area of the Middle East and North Africa until very recently is a vivid further testimony to our thesis of relatively low population levels in the area: cities never spawned an urbanism intensive enough to trigger new productive technologies which in turn could have softened the edge of sharp male-female status distinctions. Ibn Khaldūn’s complaints about urban effeminacy (khanith) notwithstanding, cities remained bastions of male predominance, to say nothing about rural subsistence areas.

It is not difficult to see, with the guidance of our great historian, how status competition escalates into the conquest by nomads of the neighboring rural-urban region. Given a propitious situation of urban demographic weakness and the general superiority of cavalry forces over urban infantry militias prior to the invention of firearms it was always possible for one competitor to manipulate circumstances in such a way as to mobilize the dormant communal aspects of ’āṣabiyya ethics in his tribe. It is the forging of individual status aspirations with collective protective and patrimonial interests which Ibn Khaldūn considers the optimal form of ’āṣabiyya ethics. He does not tire in eulogizing the morals of the first generation of conquerors who are distinguished from each other only by the size and seniority of their lineages, as was the case before the conquests, and do not compete with each other for power and wealth, even though these latter two are the sweet fruits of the entire venture out of the tribal haunts. Ibn Khaldūn seems to be

47 Q II 114. For hinth I read khanith.
48 Q II 118-24.
49 Q II 65. Strikingly, the section on arms and armies is entirely devoted to a discussion of cavalry organization; see Q II 65-79.
50 See, for instance, Q I 315.
fascinated by the strong bias in subsistence ethics against individual competition, except in the comparatively harmless area of status ambitions, and for the communal possession of power and wealth. By contrast, open competition in advanced rural-urban centers or empires for political leadership as well as landed and commercial property seem to him a sacrificing of too much communality in favor of abominable general competition. The ideal empire is run by scions of noble lineages vying with each other for virtue while military leadership as well as fiscal and property profits are somehow vested in the conquering tribe, which new forms the imperial ruling class.

The openness of power and wealth to competition and the apparent absence of communal controls over these human aspirations in rural-urban centers is so profoundly disturbing to Ibn Khaldūn that he gives himself over to strong polemics dispersed throughout the entire historical analysis of the *Muqaddima*. The most frequent charge is that of the softening ease and luxury offered by the city — of course only to the tribal ruling class, since for the rest of the urban people life was by no means more luxurious than on the countryside, as argued in the first section of this paper. Urbanites are morally inferior and lack a basic sense of shame which otherwise would hold them back from compulsory laws rather than voluntary moral assent. Lying, gambling, cheating, deception, theft, perjury and commercial interest-taking are the result of excessive urbanization, as are adultery and homosexuality. After the disintegration of the empire city states emerge which are at first governed by councils, later by kings. These kings fancy themselves as noble and imperial lords, whereas in truth they often have originated only recently from among the rabble. In sum, rural-urban centers are the complete opposite of subsistence areas: they have abandoned all communal ethics in favor of unrestrained competition.

The derogatory description of urban life seems to be perfectly in tune with Ibn Khaldūn's ethics of minimal competition and maximum communality. If all communal restraints are gone people compete in

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51 Q I 353; II 87.
52 Q I 221; II 107-8, 214-5.
53 Q I 225-6; cf. II 79-83, 264, 299-300.
54 Q I 230.
55 Q II 257, 260.
56 Q I 267-8.
immorality, at least this is what the text of the *Muqaddima* asserts. But in his zeal Ibn Khaldün contradicts himself. Since he is dealing here with what I have called in this paper rural-urban centers or regions, which are in a state of emancipation from imperial control, it has to be assumed that the political institutions of these regions are more closely matched than in the empires with the productive and commercial possibilities set by cereal agriculture and animal transportation technologies. Therefore it is striking to find councils in these rural-urban regions which clearly have to be understood as communal institutions intended to curb political competition for supreme leadership. Of course, Ibn Khaldün does not fail to mention that these communal councils eventually are unable to restrain the political antagonists and are replaced by the one-man rule of the victor in the competition. However, as ephemeral as these councils are, here certainly rural-urban realms in situations of political autonomy are capable of producing what in the *Muqaddima* is admired only in tribes, namely communal institutions regulating competition. Imperial cities do perhaps display untrammelled competition for status, power and wealth, since after all, as maintained earlier in the paper, they figure as parts of artificial imperial constructs with little communal coherence. But in rural-urban realms communality is by no means dead, if we can believe Ibn Khaldün's apparently inadvertent testimony on urban councils given in contrast to his main argument concerning the absence of all urban restraints.

The historical background concerning Ibn Khaldün's passing remark about urban councils can be found among the so-called party kings (*mulūk al-tawā'if*) in existence in Spain between the abolition of the caliphate and the Almoravid conquest (421-86/1031-94). Related phenomena such as urban militias can also be found in Syrian, Iraqi and Iranian rural-urban regions during roughly the same time period.

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The only case of a formal council in an Islamic empire, of which I am aware, is that of the Council of the Almohads (shūrā al-muwahhidūn) which grew out of Berber tribal origins in Morocco, maintained itself in spite of the artificiality of the Almohad empire begun in 500/1107 and was continued in the rural-urban realm of the Ḥafṣids around Tunis in Ifriqiya after the Almohads began breaking up in 625/1229. For the rest, imperial leaders and conquering kings in Islamic countries discontinued whatever tribal assemblies they started out with and administered their land assemblages with the help of informal councils of appointed advisors. Unfortunately, in spite of their formal existence, the Spanish-Muslim councils or the Council of the Almohads never achieved the legal status which their Tuscan or Lombard counterparts on the other side of the Mediterranean acquired during the same time period, on the basis of recently rediscovered Roman Law. Contrary to the situation in Italy, the imperial impulse was still too strong in Islamic countries for rural-urban communal restraints to take hold.

Concerning the other major institution of rural-urban communalism, the market (ṣūq), Ibn Khaldūn is more eloquent. On the one hand the market represents a rather mediocre communalism compared to the non-market forms of distribution and exchange in subsistence communities, such as reciprocity and communal allotments. Accordingly,
Ibn Khaldūn criticizes the market as requiring from merchants such attitudes far removed from manliness (murūʿa) as craftiness and pugnacity since bad merchandise, non-payment and disputes are endemic. On the other hand, the Muqaddima issues strong warnings against rulers competing with merchants on the market, since with their immense fiscal resources rulers can dictate prices, demolish the market and through their monopoly remove all communal restraints imposed through the market on distribution and exchange. Although the market is a haven for crooks and attracts the covetous eyes of rulers, it is an indispensable communal institution, with its price mechanism setting limits to economic competition.

In the Muqaddima the fact is stressed that market competitors all possess relatively small fortunes, compared to governmental tax revenues, and earn their profits piecemeal: the community has an interest in keeping the competitors small so that the market will not be exploded by monopolists. Furthermore, the market is restricted almost exclusively to consumer goods, that is, foodstuffs and the products of the crafts: if economic competition is unavoidable and if the market has to be created as a communally supervised instrument for the control of competition, then it is only for movable goods. Although urban real estate and agricultural land in the suburbs are valuable enough on account of their high rents or yields to be commercially desirable—contrary to the less important communally held subsistence lands among tribes — there are still strong communal ties attached to them. Buildings or parcels can be bought or sold, but commercial restrictions, such as the right of preemption by relatives or neighbors, are such that real estate for all practical purposes is kept off the market. Contrary to Adam Smith's concept of the invisible hand governing a national market on which virtually everything is traded (a concept, incidentally, which is today thought too liberal and overly much stripped of communal restraints),

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62 Q II 302-5.
63 Q II 83-7.
64 Q II 84, 303.
65 Q II 239-40, 299-300.
the markets of classical Islamic times bore the very visible, heavy hand of the rural-urban communities in which they were located 67.

One last restraint (wāzi'), Islam, has to be mentioned which, however, is not limited to specific communities but claims for itself universal validity. It is a correct appreciation of Islamic universality which causes Ibn Khaldūn to distinguish between blood binding and what he calls «religious tinge» (ṣibgha dīniyya), since obviously the latter is a vastly enlarged version of small scale ethical behavior 68. The much commented-upon, alleged secularism or even hidden double-truth Averroism of the Muqaddima reveals itself as a quite ordinary religious conviction 69. Ibn Khaldūn was a good Muslim who makes 'asabiyya a non-religious impulse because unrestrained competition for status cannot possibly be condoned religiously. 'Asabiyya is ethically valuable insofar as it restrains individual competition for power and wealth and allows unrestrained competition only on the tribal-collective level against other tribes, kingdoms or empires. Ṣibgha dīniyya is ethically even more valuable because it constrains individual competition as such, be it for power, wealth or even status and permits it only on the imperial-collective level against Christian or other rulers (on questionable grounds, one has to add from an ecumencial standpoint, however). The two overlap and therefore may reinforce each other, as was the case during the original expansion of Islam, but in a strict sense they are not fully compatible with each other.

The only sin which Ibn Khaldūn commits is that of declaring 'asabiyya as being ethically good at all. But for this sin only the most fundamentalist zealots could have censured him who, however, thanks to the general predominance of mystical Islam during late classical and early modern times were in no strong position to do so 70. Quite apart from this, Ibn Khaldūn's enthusiastic, if nostalgic, espousal of the simple life of subsistence with its firm communal ethics and without political and economic competition, councils, markets and corrupt cities should have made the heart of every die-hard religious person leap with pleasure.

68 Q 1 273-4.
69 A fuller discussion of this point can be found in Peter Von Sivers (cited in n. 57), pp. 36-47. More recently Marshall G. S. Hodgson (cited in n. 3), pp. 476-84 has reiterated the notion of Ibn Khaldūn as a double truth apologetic in the tradition of Ibn Rushd.
Even if this simple life was only a second best solution compared to *ṣibgha dinīyya*, proud and self-sufficient status seekers were much preferable to slinking and perverted city slickers. Certainly fundamentalists should have found the he-man better than the weasel. For the rest, the seeming marginality of religion in the *Muqaddima* is thematically conditioned. Any competition and communality falling short of universal Islam are religiously unacceptable ethical principles, but they are the stuff of which history is made. After all, the historian describes the world first, before he tries to change it, contrary to what theologians and Karl Marx do, in their different ways.

Overall, we find in re-examining the *Muqaddima*, that this justly famous, introduction to history is a curiously twisted, grand misconception of the historical process. Of course, it still remains a monument of analytical achievement just as the works of Marx or Hegel do, no matter how critically one approaches it: the sheer scope of analysis always towers over the efforts of other contemporaries. Ibn Khaldūn starts out with a splendid analysis of labor and production. But then he devotes the rest of the *Muqaddima* mistakenly, although brilliantly, to subsistence life centered around the technology of cereal farming with plows and draft animals as well as livestock holdings for auto-consumption. True, this subsistence life is made to develop inevitably into imperial or royal organizations and urbanism. But this development is presumed to last only a few generations and periodically society relapses into pristine subsistence. Ibn Khaldūn is sorely mistaken in taking subsistence as a model since long before the beginning of Islamic history the Middle East and North Africa had advanced to the productive technology of irrigated farming with such attendant subsidiary productive institutions as cities and nomadism. Of course, large areas of subsistence agriculture survived and never changed much from the time of the first plow to that of Ibn Khaldūn, but the rural-urban centers of advanced irrigated agriculture nevertheless redefined them as marginal. They were no longer the bottom line against which all historical development was to be evaluated, but the cellar of history into which to fall one would strenuously avoid.

It was simply no longer possible in the seventh/fourteenth century, even before the general introduction of firearms, to write history based on a marginal productive technology. Some typical misconceptions resulting from the wrong perspective of marginal agriculture as the analytical base were presented in the two sections of this paper, be they concerned with advanced agriculture, the origin of cities, the aggressive-
ness of nomads and the role of cities free of imperial control. They all lead up to one basic problem, the confusion between terminus ad quem and terminus a quo. Clearly in history the technological and ethical standards had been set by specialized rural producers and urban crafts men and if they were not upheld, for lack of demographic mass, and a widespread return to subsistence farming was the result, subsistence by no means became the criterion of historical development again. Society was haunted by the memory of advanced technology and even if the demographic base had become too small to sustain this technology, one imperial ruling class after the other tried its hands at repopulating the Middle East and North Africa afresh, with diminishing returns. The advanced stage of technology could not be permanently re-acquired through the people from the subsistence sector alone. In order to reach it, urban demography had to catch up again. Cities had their first chance to improve their population levels through the introduction of firearms, even though these arms at first strengthened the wrong groups by stabilizing the artificial empires which governed the cities. But this happened well after the Muqaddima was written.

Ibn Khaldūn is a powerful author who easily reawakens in us slumbering yearnings for the Simple Life back in nature and has not failed to seduce countless commentators. But advanced technology, even if it is regrettable to some people, is almost impossible to abandon even if demography forces a temporary regress. Not to have admitted this is the ultimate limit of the Muqaddima.

APPENDIX

It should be noted that suspicions about Ibn Khaldūn's religious orthodoxy have been raised not only on the basis of the Muqaddima but also on the basis of biographical data. The pre-eminent Mālikī jurist and older contemporary of Ibn Khaldūn, Abū Abdallah Muḥammad b. 'Arafa al-Warghamī (d. 1401), is on record as having expressed strong reservations about the juridical competence of our author. From these reservations one modern scholar has concluded that Ibn 'Arafa must have been dissatisfied with the social-historical «determinism» apparent

71 Q II 231-34.
in the *Muqaddima* which «is not that of the religious scholars». This interpretation, for which no sources are cited, seems a bit farfetched, since Ibn ‘Arafa’s reservations deal specifically with Ibn Khaldūn’s juridical competence and not with an allegedly blameworthy abandonment of divine omnipotence in favor of natural causation. In any case, even such a seemingly conclusive dismissal of Ibn Khaldūn’s juridical abilities as that of Ibn ‘Arafa does not furnish incontrovertible proof of our author’s alleged religious unorthodoxy.

Thus, as argued above both the double-truth Averroism (see p. 88) and the biographical data concerning Ibn Khaldūn’s possible religious license are unconvincing. However, since Ibn Khaldūn’s work demonstrably did not stimulate much critical research in the field of historical studies, one still might suggest that the *Muqaddima* represents a kind of secularism which Middle Eastern and North African scholars prior to the twentieth century were unwilling to engage in. In other words, even though Ibn Khaldūn pursued secular interests which neither he nor his contemporaries, including Ibn ‘Arafa, found incompatible with the apparatus of juridical-religious doctrines of the time, subsequent generations of scholars unconsciously might have found Ibn Khaldūn’s secularism unpalatable for their different juridical-religious tastes.

Here we enter the wide field of the social conditions under which secular and religious studies are pursued — a field which is still only vaguely understood. As a general rule of orientation in this field one might stipulate (1) that the more stripped-down and fundamentalist the dominant religion is, the more attractive it becomes for the development of secular studies, fundamentalist opposition notwithstanding. (2) Conversely, the more ritually-enriched and elaborate religion becomes, the less time it allows for secular studies, mystical tolerance notwithstanding. In spite of its censure of secularism, fundamentalism is more conducive to secular studies than is a ritually elaborate religion. In view of the specific content of the *Muqaddima* and the biographical details we possess of its author’s life, it appears that Ibn Khaldūn lived at the end of a period characterized by (1) and shortly before the onset of a period typified by (2).

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